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Master Sgt. Sean Brennan

Maintainers with the 40th Expeditionary Maintenance Squadron at a forward operating location repair the flap of a B-1 in the rain May 7. Recent storms caused some aircraft to divert to alternate landing locations.

Riding out the storm

Storm causes longest B-1 combat mission in history

By Capt. David May
40th Air Expeditionary Group
Public Affairs

ASIA-PACIFIC -- A 40th Air Expeditionary Group aircrew from Dyess flying from an unidentified location in the Asia-Pacific region in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, completed the longest-ever B-1 combat mission May 4.

The grueling mission lasted 23 hours and began May 3 when a 9th Expeditionary Bomb Squadron B-1

launched on a patrol over Afghanistan where it was assigned escort duty for an Army convoy just south of Kabul.

After the convoy made it safely to its destination, the crew was authorized to return to base, but ended up being diverted hundreds of miles to an alternate location due to a large storm moving into the area.

"It was a little windy (and) a little rainy before we left," said Maj. Mark Bennett, the aircraft commander. "But nothing indicated what the

weather would be like when we returned."

This was Major Bennett's 17th combat mission.

Capt. Mark Johnson was the copilot of the crew and Capt. Matthew Farley and Matthew Clapp were the weapons systems officers.

As they were returning at about three hours out, Major Bennett called in to check the weather conditions and found out about the impending storm.

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Storm

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“Conditions were rapidly degrading,” he said. “At that point, we knew we had to get back as quickly as we could before the severe weather hit.”

Captain Farley was the offensive systems officer for the mission and could only see through the side window of B-1 from his position behind the pilot. During the mission, his third in actual combat, he had used his radar to constantly map and monitor the ground in case they needed to destroy any threats to the convoy.

“The radar looked really bad for weather,” he said, although admitting that it’s typically not used for looking at storms. “We were zig-zagging left and right to pick the best path through the storm.”

As they got closer, because of the weight of the aircraft and runway conditions, the crew had to either commit themselves to the landing or make the decision to divert elsewhere. They kept contact with the base and the choice became a “rolling decision,” said Major Bennett.

Back at the base, another decision had to be made—whether or not to launch a tanker to possibly refuel the B-1 if conditions worsened, thereby giving up another aircraft.

“We launched it with the intention that it would almost

certainly be diverted as well,” said Col. Jeff Beene, 40th AEG commander, who made the decision. “With the severe crosswinds, the tanker gave us much better options for getting the B-1 to a suitable location.”

After the tanker was up, this was a tremendous boost to the crew.

“When they told us ‘we’ve got a tanker for you,’ that definitely made a difference,” said Captain Johnson, who was on his 8th combat mission.

As the B-1 approached, the weather continued to worsen. From about 75 miles out, conditions were “pretty dicey,” said Major Bennett. “You don’t have time to worry. You’re just concentrating on flying the best approach possible while at the same time working out your other options if needed.”

With just 10 miles to go and approaching at more than 150 miles per hour, the aircraft suddenly received the call to divert. However, this did not mean a sigh of relief.

“Until we had the gas and were on the way, I was still a little concerned,” said Captain Farley. “There are a lot of things that still have to go right.”

After successfully refueling, the B-1 made straight for the alternate location, which was hundreds of miles away. At this point, the crew had already been in the air more than 18 hours.

“Normally, most people have a habit or routine going into (extremely long missions),” said Captain Clapp. “But

we were expecting a (normal length mission).”

With all that was going on, Captain Clapp said he found it easy to stay alert. He was the only member of the crew to have flown longer missions during previous (non-combat) flights. This was his 18th combat mission.

“No matter how tired everybody got, we were always going back to basics,” said Captain Johnson.

After finally landing at the new location, the crew headed for their bunks. They had all been up between 36 and 38 hours, including the mission brief, flight and maintenance.

“I’ve never been up that long before,” Captain Johnson said. “That was the longest day of my life.”

DEPLOYMENT CORNER

Twenty-three days remain until the Air Combat Command’s inspector general team visits Dyess to conduct an Operational Readiness Inspection.

Here is a key fact about personnel deployment functions to inform those who might not normally be familiar with the procedure.

◆ Family Readiness Briefings are considered “current” for 12 months.

(Courtesy of the 7th Logistics Readiness Squadron.)

Are you ready?